



30 September 2019

Urgent need for rollout of platform affordances for greater oversight of campaign spending

Dear Senura,

Thank you for taking the time, with colleagues from Facebook in Delhi, to debrief me in detail around what Facebook has planned around the up-coming Presidential Election in Sri Lanka. I am glad that work with the Elections Commissions is proceeding apace, and trust that Facebook will also consult CPA and the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) with regard to voter education and other measures to strengthen electoral integrity.

As noted on the call, CMEV and CPA, along with others in Sri Lanka like Transparency International, have for years done a lot of work towards greater accountability around campaign financing. Details to this effect are on CMEV's as well as CPA's website, and a Google search away. Yet, tellingly, asset declarations as well as greater transparency around online campaign spending, including on Facebook, remain elusive. I have also passed on details around how one campaign, through an official Facebook page, has boosted content that was already debunked by Facebook's own 3rd party fact-checker, AFP. This content served to incite violence and hate against the Muslim community through thinly veiled racism. Highlighting this example on Twitter led to many expressing concern that the platform needs to do more to stop this sort of content from being monetised, in violation of community guidelines as well as ad oversight guidelines. This ad is a harbinger of much more to come, and for Facebook, an urgent reminder of how much more scrutiny and oversight needs to go into the authorisation of ads.

Again, as noted on the call, Facebook also needs to more clearly and carefully define what it terms as a 'political ad' or 'political content' especially in the context of an electoral campaign, and ads that will taken out in Sri Lanka at this time.

I also wanted to reiterate the need to, on an urgent basis, make available in Sri Lanka, the Ads Library Report, <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/>. This is available for India, and has led to important articles like <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/political-ad-spend-on-facebook-crosses-rs-10-cr-bjp-supporters-continue-to-lead/articleshow/68761641.cms?from=mdr> to be published. On the call, a colleague from Facebook noted that the only roll-out planned at present is the release of the Facebook Ad Library, https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=political_and_issue_ads&country=ALL.

This is however, is both entirely inadequate and unhelpful.

I see no valid reason for Facebook to treat Sri Lanka's Presidential Election any differently than the Indian Lok Sabha election, and thus, make available in Sri Lanka the same oversight and resources that were rapidly iterated for India. As noted on the call, the fundamental difference between the two platforms is that while the Ad Library gives details about a specific public page or ad, the Ads Library Report gives a snapshot of spending by parties, politicians and sectors, at a glance, with exact amounts spent. This is urgently required for Sri Lanka, and will both vastly and concrete aid the work of journalists and civil society in the country, even without enabling legislation, to keep tabs on Facebook campaign spending – and for the first time in the country's electoral history.

Without a more public, careful definition of what for the company 'political content' means, the greater oversight of boosted and monetised content and the availability of the Ads Library Report, Facebook risks the weaponisation of platform in the lead up to and after the Presidential Election in a manner that civil society cannot scrutinise, election monitors cannot study and the Elections Commission cannot oversee.

I trust the company will urgently look into these recommendations, informed by key insights from the doctoral study into Facebook weaponisation and content dynamics at scale, as well as the experience of working with CMEV / CPA on elections violence monitoring for over a decade.

Best regards,



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